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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 001351

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SUBJECT: VIEW FROM THE BARRIOS: CARITAS EXPLAINS CHAVEZ
CONTINUED APPEAL

REF: A. CARACAS 1330
[1](#)B. CARACAS 583

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Classified By: Political Counselor Robin D. Meyer,
for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Yaneth Marquez (protect), the Andean regional director of the Catholic charity Caritas, described to PolCouns on October 15 the political perspective of people in Venezuela's poorest areas where Caritas works. Marquez said the standard of living of Venezuela's poor had increased noticeably over the course of Chavez's presidency as a result of the social missions, new laws on pensions and women, vouchers for community work, and free registration at schools. She noted that these advances have in some instances reached a plateau because of inflation and budget cutbacks. While President Chavez still enjoys high levels of popularity in these areas, there is growing disillusionment with members of his PSUV party. Marquez expressed frustration at the failure of opposition parties to establish a presence in the barrios or to reach agreement on a strategy or unified slate of candidates for the 2010 legislative elections. End Summary.

For The Poor, Life is Better

[1](#)2. (C) Marquez, who has worked for Caritas for 20 years, stated that the standard of living in Venezuela's poorest areas had improved markedly over the past 11 years. She highlighted the following programs and laws that have provided important, direct, and immediate benefits to barrio residents:

-- Social Missions: The "mision" programs have provided local services such as free and accessible health care ("Barrio Adentro"), subsidized food ("Mercal"), and adult literacy classes ("Mision Robinson"). While recognizing that the "Barrio Adentro" program did not improve the country's health care infrastructure, she stressed the impact the program had on the daily needs of barrio residents, particularly mothers and the elderly, for whom easy access to doctors, medicine, and medical supplies was a godsend. Even as staffing shortages and inflation plague these programs, the attention given by Chavez's administration to poor areas has been unprecedented. Marquez said it is easy to underestimate the impact even small changes can have, pointing to the "Mision Robinson": "Even if the only thing a participant learns is how to sign her name, the fact that she no longer has to use a thumbprint for her signature on

government documents has a huge effect on her sense of self-worth."

-- Pensions: The Chavez-controlled National Assembly adopted a law that gave pensions to people who work in the informal sector, which includes many barrio residents. These pensions (for women over 55 and for men over 60) have made a significant difference in the lives of the elderly and their families who help support them.

-- Women: Marquez said "the revolution has given people in the barrios a sense of dignity and a knowledge that they have rights," pointing to the 2007 "Law on the Right of Women to a Life Free of Violence" as an example of real progress. Marquez said the new women's office in each local "Jefatura" (police headquarters) provided a mechanism for women to file complaints about domestic abuse; the women who staffed these offices were long-time, committed women's rights activists. Marquez said the law provided tough penalties and that men actually went to prison for violations of the law. (Note: As an aside, Marquez expressed concern about the "invisible problem" of human trafficking, particularly along the Colombia-Venezuela border. She said Caritas was undertaking a study of refugees from Colombia to assess the extent of violence against women, including trafficking. She promised to share the results with the Embassy. She also said that Caritas/Venezuela was working with its counterpart in Spain on a trafficking-related project. End Note.)

-- Vouchers: Marquez said that, under Chavez, barrio residents received "bonos" (vouchers) for participating in community activities, such as sweeping the streets. These "bonos" translated into extra food for needy residents.

-- Free School Registration: For barrio residents, the cost
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of school enrollment was a significant barrier to primary education. Under Chavez, Marquez said, school registration is free.

Disillusioned, but Still Committed to Chavez

13. (C) While the upper and middle classes have complained about inflation, mounting insecurity, and problems with basic services, Marquez said that Chavez supporters in the barrios were only now beginning to feel the effects of inflation and to increasingly complain about the problem of rampant insecurity, water shortages, and electrical outages. In the past, Chavez could convince people that he was trying his best but was thwarted by political opponents. Now, however, people were starting to blame him. Still, Marquez said that, much as in a long marriage, people continued to be committed to him despite the problems. They continued to tune in to "Alo Presidente," especially for his jokes, sometimes crude language, and "macho" confrontations with other world leaders. However, people in the barrios were skeptical of the PSUV party leadership and considered the National Assembly PSUV Deputies to be "lazy and corrupt." Nevertheless, many feared that the opposition, still under the leadership of the pre-Chavez political establishment, might roll back the progress they have experienced under Chavez.

Need for Opposition Electoral Outreach in the Barrios

14. (C) According to Marquez, the opposition has practically no presence in the barrios. Nor are opposition-oriented newspapers, such as "El Universal" or "El Nacional," read there. The principal sources of news are the omnipresent daily "Ultimas Noticias," radio, and both national and cable television stations. When asked about young opposition

leaders, such as Sucre Mayor Carlos Ocariz and former Chacao Mayor Leopoldo Lopez, Marquez said there was some resentment in the barrios against "rich, young" opposition leaders, but that Lopez had made some inroads. She lamented that "Accion Democratica" (AD) had not reactivated the network it used to have in the barrios. She suggested that some disillusioned Chavistas might see AD as a possible alternative given their historic ties to the party.

15. (C) Marquez noted that Chavez had already started campaigning for the 2010 legislative elections and strengthening his social programs, while the opposition was still disorganized. Marquez claimed the opposition could win as much as 40 percent of the vote if it organized around a unified slate of candidates and presented fresh faces, not the old political figures of the past. This same rejection of "old leadership" would give the opposition an advantage if the PSUV nominated incumbent Deputies for reelection. The most important thing, Marquez said, was to make the elections about the individual candidates and "to separate Chavez from the elections." She suggested that the opposition frame its campaign around the theme of "pluralism in the National Assembly," a theme that would permit disillusioned Chavistas to support opposition candidates without repudiating Chavez. She also said the opposition would have to work as hard as the Chavistas; in the past, the opposition has "taken time off" during summer and Christmas vacations.

Draft INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION LAW Causes
Self-Censorship by Some NGOs

16. (C) According to Marquez, the draft International Cooperation Law proposed earlier this year would seriously affect Caritas's funding (ref B). However, the Venezuelan government (GBRV) developed the law to target overtly political NGOs, specifically "Sumate." "Even though the law was not passed," Marquez said, "many organizations have eliminated certain activities."

Background: Caritas in Venezuela

17. (C) While officially linked to the Catholic Church, Caritas does not receive funding from the Church. In

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Venezuela there are 38 regional chapters in all 23 states, with 300 full-time employees and 1,000 core volunteers. Marquez said the charity enjoys a great deal of respect and cooperation from the GBRV at the local level, but that cooperation becomes more difficult at higher levels. Prior to Chavez's presidency, 50 percent of the Venezuelan government's social programs were implemented by Caritas. Currently there is some cooperation but no GBRV financing. Thirty percent of Caritas' operating budget of \$150,000 is raised from donations within Venezuela. The rest of its operating budget and all its program budget comes from support from the European Union (\$500,000) and other Caritas chapters, including those in the U.S., France, Spain and Italy. In Venezuela, Caritas is involved in humanitarian programs ranging from care for the elderly to emergency assistance to refugee resettlement. Marquez said that Caritas' grassroots humanitarian activities made it hard for the GBRV to criticize its work. However, the "Peace and Justice Commission," which is under Caritas' umbrella, has been a target of GBRV criticism for its work on human rights-related issues.

18. (C) Marquez said Caritas was putting emphasis on training of community leaders in the specific areas of public speaking, grant and proposal writing, and self-esteem. She said the GBRV recognized the lack of sufficient grassroots leadership capacity and permitted organizations, such as

Caritas, to provide these activities, understanding the risk that such social organizing skills could be used against the GBRV. Marquez said the weakness of the Chavista grassroots leadership training effort was the lack of a solid theoretical framework for the "revolution."

Comment

[19](#). (C) Marquez's description of life in Venezuela's poorest areas provides a first-hander's look into Chavez' base of support. The opposition's failure to acknowledge the improvements that have taken place for the poor during Chavez's government will hinder its efforts to garner support in these areas. Marquez' assessment, based on 20 years of grassroots experience, is consistent with the recent polling results discussed in ref A.
DUDDY